

## Press Release 002

### Can Advertising Manipulate People Against Their Will?

Ever since **James M. Vicary** was apparently able to demonstrate that it is possible to influence people with subliminal messages and without their knowledge about it, people are afraid of such marketing tactics.

1957, Vicary implemented the slogans "Eat Popcorn" and "Drink Coca Cola" into a movie. He used such a short display duration, people had almost no chance to recognize it. He then observed a significant increase in sales for Coke and popcorn.

The only problem is - the experiment never took place. It was only a big public relations coup to promote Vicary's marketing company. Despite the discovery of this fraud, the fear of people is persistent.

While on the one hand, scientists are arguing about whether subliminal advertising can by definition be existent at all, many empirical studies proved that it is indeed possible to influence the actions of people - without them knowing about it. Yale professor **John A. Bargh** is considered as one of the greatest experts in the field of unconscious processing. He found out that people unconsciously copy certain patterns of behavior of other people. Furthermore, dealing with certain words can correspondingly change the behavior of individuals unconsciously (**priming**). Others, such as Todorov and Engell, showed that subliminally shown faces can stimulate the amygdala in our brain, which can influence the willingness to take risks and therefore the buying behavior. Others showed that you don't have to be able to recall an ad in order to show distinct reactions.

Critics might point out, that this is not subliminal influence. As initially indicated, some scientists define "subliminal" in a way it cannot be existent by definition. Therefore, any proof is no evidence for subliminal but subconscious effects. In the end, this scientific quibble is not of any interest to ordinary citizens - there, the only thing that counts is the fact that apparently people can be enticed to actions without knowing about it.

So, are we defenseless against the tactics of marketing experts? Is there a need to legislate for a better control of insidious marketing?

No!

Just like science has proved (with the help of the latest insights into the functioning of our brain) that subliminal influence is possible, it has also shown that these possibilities are very limited.

It is generally not possible to entice someone to something he would reject on principle. Subliminal manipulation by advertising almost always needs an already existing need or a corresponding desire of the consumer. The implementation of a can of coke into a movie can make the audience buy an appropriate drink - but only if they are already thirsty or generally like cola drinks – the ad would only give some push towards a specific brand. Who does not drink Coke out of conviction, will not suddenly start to do, just because an ad told him to. This is also because of the way our brain works. As we know today, the subconscious mind is a complex brain function that always processes information before the consciousness. Remarkable is the fact that even the subconsciousness can evaluate information. So, even subliminal messages are reviewed in detail by our brain. Thus, even our subconscious can distinguish between "good" and "bad" advertisement. In a nutshell: We own some kind of a subconscious shield that protects us from influences that we would reject consciously.

So people can be reassured that even insidious subliminal advertising cannot make them do things, they do not want to do. Nevertheless, advertising effects take place primarily subconsciously and thus are never completely controllable. However, this is not a sneaky trick of the marketing industry, but a basic principle of advertising and persuasion. It happens at newspapers, friendly discussions as well as in politics and religion.

As good as this sounds to consumers, it is a big problem for advertising companies. How can these implicit effects be evaluated? How does advertising need to look like in order to not get rejected by the target audience - neither intentionally nor subconsciously. Using data mining procedures, novel analytical tools, such as **Placedise**, make the complex topic "advertising effects" usable and understandable. At the same time, for example, the European Union is investing one billion euros into the **Human Brain Project** - to study the processes of our brain in detail and also develop far-reaching analysis tools. One can be sure that there will be even more in the future.

Thus, while companies get more and more controlling tools, consumers get additional transparency and information. In any case, our automatic subconscious shield will be still active even in 100 years.

## Press Contact

Jens Kuerschner

[j.kuerschner@placedise.com](mailto:j.kuerschner@placedise.com)

+49 171 8267260

Jens Kuerschner is managing director at Placedise. He studied at the University of California Los Angeles (USA) and the University of Bayreuth (Germany), where he also did extensive research on the subliminal effects of product placement. Placedise is a software that is based on this research. It is able to forecast the advertising effects of product placement and similar marketing tactics. Please find more information at [www.placedise.com](http://www.placedise.com).

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